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Extracting Young Gussie

P.G. WODEHOUSE

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

EXTRACTING YOUNG GUSSIE

A Short Story

by

P.G. Wodehouse

- 1915 -

The Saturday Evening Post

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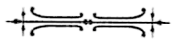
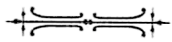
They Got Hold of Each Others Hands and were Shaking Them Till I Wondered Their Arms Didn't Come Unscrewed!

1915
Saturday Evening Post
Illustrated by Martin Justice



EXTRACTING YOUNG GUSSIE



Extracting Young Gussie

HE sprang it on me before breakfast. There in seven words you have a complete character sketch of my Aunt Agatha. I could go on indefinitely about brutality and lack of consideration. I merely say that she routed me out of bed to listen to her painful story, somewhere in the small hours. It can't have been half past eleven when Jeeves, my man, woke me out of the dreamless and broke the news:

"Mrs. Gregson to see you, sir."

I thought she must be walking in her sleep, but I crawled out of bed and got into a dressing gown. I knew Aunt Agatha well enough to know that, if she had come to see me, she was going to see me. That's the sort of woman she is.

I Thought She Must be Walking in Her Sleep, But I Got Into a Dressing Gown

She was sitting bolt upright in a chair, staring into space. When I came in she looked at me in that darn critical way that always makes me feel as if I had gelatin where my spine ought to be. Aunt Agatha is one of those strong-minded women. I should think Queen

Elizabeth must have been something like her. She bosses her husband, Spenser Gregson, a battered little chappie on the Stock Exchange. She bosses my cousin, Gussie Mannering-Phipps. She bosses her sister-in-law, Gussie's mother. And, worst of all, she bosses me. She has an eye like a man-eating fish, and she has got moral suasion down to a fine point.

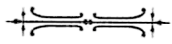
I dare say there are fellows in the world—men of blood and iron, don't you know, and all that sort of thing—whom she couldn't intimidate; but if you're a chappie like me, fond of a quiet life, you simply curl into a ball when you see her coming, and hope for the best. My experience is that when Aunt Agatha wants you to do a thing you do it or else you find yourself wondering why those fellows in the olden days made such a fuss when they had trouble with the Spanish Inquisition.

"Hello, Aunt Agatha," I said.

"Bertie," she said, "you look a sight. You look perfectly dissipated."

I was feeling like a badly wrapped brown-paper parcel. I'm never at my best in the early morning. I said so.

"Early morning! I had breakfast three hours ago, and have been walking in the park ever since, trying to compose my thoughts."



If I ever breakfasted at half past eight I should walk on the Embankment, trying to end it all in a watery grave.

"I am extremely worried, Bertie. That is why I have come to you."

And then I saw she was going to start something, and I bleated weakly to Jeeves to bring me tea. But she had begun before I could get it.

"What are your immediate plans, Bertie?"

"Well, I rather thought of tottering out for a bite of lunch later on, and then possibly staggering round to the club, and after that, if I felt strong enough, I might trickle off to Walton Heath for a round of golf."

"I am not interested in your totterings and tricklings. I mean, have you any important engagements in the next week or so?"

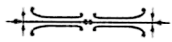
I scented danger.

"Rather!" I said. "Heaps! Millions! Booked solid!"

"What are they?"

"I—er—well, I don't quite know."

"I thought as much. You have no engagements. Very well, then, I want you to start immediately for America."



"America!"

Do not lose sight of the fact that all this was taking place on an empty stomach, shortly after the rising of the lark.

"Yes, America. I suppose even you have heard of America."

"But why America?"

"Because that is where your Cousin Gussie is. He is in New York, and I can't get at him."

"What's Gussie been doing?"

"Gussie is making a perfect idiot of himself."

To one who knew young Gussie as well as I did, the words opened up a wide field for speculation.

"In what way?"

"He has lost his head over a creature."

On past performances this rang true. Ever since he arrived at man's estate Gussie had been losing his head over creatures. He's that sort of chap. But, as the creatures never seemed to lose their heads over him, it had never amounted to much.

"I imagine that you know perfectly well why Gussie went to America, Bertie. You know

how wickedly extravagant your Uncle Cuthbert was."

She alluded to Gussie's governor, the late head of the family, and I am bound to say she spoke the truth. Nobody was fonder of old Uncle Cuthbert than I was, but everybody knows that, where money was concerned, he was the most complete chump in the annals of the nation. He had an expensive thirst. He never backed a horse that didn't get housemaid's knee in the middle of the race. He had a system of beating the bank at Monte Carlo which used to make the administration hang out the bunting and ring the joy bells when he was sighted in the offing. Take him for all in all, dear old Uncle Cuthbert was as willing a spender as ever called the family lawyer a bloodsucking vampire because he wouldn't let Uncle Cuthbert cut down the timber to raise another thousand.

"He left your Aunt Julia very little money for a woman in her position. Beechwood requires a great deal of keeping up, and poor dear Spenser, though he does his best to help, has not unlimited resources. It was clearly understood why Gussie went to America. He is not clever but he is very good-looking and, though he has no title, the Mannering-Phippses are one of the best and oldest families in England. He had some excellent

letters of introduction, and when he wrote home to say that he had met the most charming and beautiful girl in the world I felt quite happy. He continued to rave about her for several mails, and then this morning a letter has come from him in which he says, quite casually as a sort of afterthought, that he knows we are broadminded enough not to think any the worse of her because she is on the vaudeville stage."

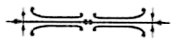
"Oh, I say!"

"It was like a thunderbolt. The girl's name, it seems, is Ray Denison and, according to Gussie, she does something which he describes as a single on the big time. What this degraded performance may be I have not the least notion. As a further recommendation he states that she lifted them out of their seats at Mosenstein's last week. Whom she lifted, and how or why, and who or what Mr. Mosenstein may be, I cannot tell you."

"By Jove," I said, "it's like a sort of thingummy-bob, isn't it! A sort of fate, what?"

"I fail to understand you."

"Well, Aunt Julia, you know, don't you know? Heredity and so forth. What's bred in the bone will come out in the wash, and all that kind of thing, you know."



"Don't be absurd, Bertie."

That was all very well, but it was a coincidence for all that. Nobody ever mentions it, and the family have been trying to forget it for twenty-five years, but it's a known fact that my Aunt Julia, Gussie's mother, was a vaudeville artist once, and a very good one, too, I'm told. She was playing in pantomime at Drury Lane when Uncle Cuthbert saw her first. It was before my time, of course, and long before I was old enough to take notice the family had made the best of it, and Aunt Agatha had pulled up her socks and put in a lot of educative work, and with a microscope you couldn't tell Aunt Julia from a genuine dyed-in-the-wool aristocrat. Women adapt themselves so quickly! I have a pal who married Daisy Trimble of the Gaiety, and when I meet her now I feel like walking out of her presence backward.

But there the thing was, and you couldn't get away from it. Gussie had vaudeville blood in him, and it looked as if he were reverting to type, or whatever they call it.

"By Jove," I said, for I am interested in this heredity stuff, "perhaps the thing is going to be a regular family tradition, like you read about in books—a sort of Curse of the Mannering-Phippses, as it were. Perhaps each head of the family is going to marry into

vaudeville for ever and ever. Unto the what-d'you-call-it generation, don't you know?"

"Please do not be quite idiotic, Bertie. There is one head of the family who is certainly not going to do it, and that is Gussie. And you are going to America to stop him."

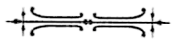
"Yes, but why me?"

"Why you? You are too vexing, Bertie. Have you no sort of feeling for the family? You are too lazy to try to be a credit to yourself, but at least you can exert yourself to prevent Gussie's disgracing us. You are going to America because you are Gussie's cousin, because you have always been his closest friend, because you are the only one of the family who has absolutely nothing to occupy his time except golf and night clubs."

"I play a lot of auction."

"And, as you say, idiotic gambling in low dens. If you require another reason you are going because I ask you as a personal favor."

What she meant was that, if I refused, she would exert the full bent of her natural genius to make life a Hades for me. She held me with her glittering eye. I have never met anyone who can give a better imitation of the Ancient Mariner.



"So you will start at once, won't you, Bertie?"

I didn't hesitate.

"Rather!" I said. "Of course I will."

Jeeves came in with the tea.

"Jeeves," I said, "we start for America on Saturday."

"Very good, sir," he said. "Which suit will you wear?"

New York is a large city conveniently situated on the edge of America, so that you step off the liner right on to it without an effort. You can't lose your way. You go out of a barn and down some stairs, and there you are, right in among it. The only possible objection any reasonable chappie could find to the place is that they loose you into it from the boat at such an ungodly hour.

I left Jeeves to get my baggage safely past an aggregation of suspicious-minded pirates who were digging for buried treasure among my new shirts, and drove to Gussie's hotel, where I requested the squad of gentlemanly clerks behind the desk to produce him.

That's where I got my first shock. He wasn't there. I pleaded with them to think

again, and they thought again, but it was no good. No Augustus Mannering-Phipps on the premises.

I admit I was hard hit. There I was, alone in a strange city and no signs of Gussie. What was the next step? I am never one of the master minds in the early morning; the old bean doesn't somehow seem to get into its stride till pretty late in the p. m.'s; and I couldn't think what to do. However, some instinct took me through a door at the back of the lobby, and I found myself in a large room with an enormous picture stretching across the whole of one wall, and under the picture a counter, and behind the counter divers chappies in white, serving drinks. They have barmen, don't you know, in New York, not barmaids. Rum idea!

I put myself unreservedly into the hands of one of the white chappies. He was a friendly soul, and I told him the whole state of affairs. I asked him what he thought would meet the case.

He said that in a situation of that sort he usually prescribed a lightning whizzer, an invention of his own. He said this was what rabbits trained on when they were matched against grizzly bears, and there was only one instance on record of the bear having lasted three rounds. So I tried a couple and, by Jove!

the man was perfectly right. As I drained the second a great load seemed to fall from my heart, and I went out in quite a braced way to have a look at the city.

I was surprised to find the streets quite full. People were bustling along as if it were some reasonable hour and not the gray dawn. In the tramcars they were absolutely standing on each other's necks. Going to business or something, I take it. Wonderful Johnnies!

The odd part of it was that after the first shock of seeing all this frightful energy the thing didn't seem so strange. I've spoken to fellows since who have been to New York, and they tell me they found it just the same. Apparently there's something in the air, either the ozone or the phosphates or something, which makes you sit up and take notice. A kind of zip, as it were. A sort of bally freedom, if you know what I mean, that gets into your blood, and bucks you up, and makes you feel that

"God's in His heaven:
All's right with the world,"

and you don't care if you've got odd socks on. I can't express it better than by saying that the thought uppermost in my mind, as I walked about the place they call Times Square, was

that there were three thousand miles of deep water between me and my Aunt Agatha.

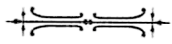
It's a funny thing about looking for things. If you hunt for a needle in a haystack you don't find it. If you don't give a darn whether you ever see the needle or not it runs into you the first time you lean against the stack. By the time I had strolled up and down once or twice, seeing the sights and letting the white chappie's corrective permeate my system, I was feeling that I wouldn't care if Gussie and I never met again; and I'm dashed if I didn't suddenly catch sight of the old lad, as large as life, just turning in at a doorway down the street.

I called after him, but he didn't hear me, so I legged it in pursuit and caught him going into an office on the first floor. The name on the door was Abe Riesbitter, Vaudeville Agent, and from the other side of the door came the sound of many voices.

He turned and stared at me.

"Bertie! What on earth are you doing here? Where have you sprung from? When did you arrive?"

"Landed this morning. I went round to your hotel, but they said you weren't there. They had never heard of you."



"I've changed my name. I call myself George Wilson."

"Why, on earth?"

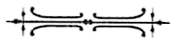
"Well, you try calling yourself Augustus Mannering-Phipps over here, and see how it strikes you. You feel a perfect ass. I don't know what it is about America, but the broad fact is that it's not a place where you can call yourself Augustus Mannering-Phipps. And there's another reason. I'll tell you later. Bertie, I've fallen in love with the dearest girl in the world."

The poor old nut looked at me in such a deuced calflike way, standing with his mouth open, waiting to be congratulated, that I simply hadn't the heart to tell him that I knew all about that already and had come over to the country for the express purpose of laying him a stymie. So I congratulated him.

"Thanks awfully, old man," he said. "It's a bit premature, but I fancy it's going to be all right. Come along in here, and I'll tell you about it."

"What do you want in this place? It looks a rummy spot."

"Oh, that's part of the story. I'll tell you the whole thing."



We opened the door marked Waiting Room. I never saw such a crowded place in my life. The room was packed till the walls bulged.

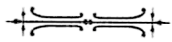
Gussie explained.

"Pros," he said. "Music-hall artists, you know, waiting to see old Abe Riesbitter. This is September the first, vaudeville's opening day. The early fall," said Gussie, who is a bit of a poet in his way, "is vaudeville's springtime. All over the country, as August wanes, sparkling comédiennes burst into bloom, the sap stirs in the veins of tramp cyclists, and last year's contortionists, waking from their summer sleep, tie themselves tentatively into knots. What I mean is, this is the beginning of the new season and everybody's out hunting for bookings."

"But what do you want here?"

"Oh, I've just got to see Abe about something. If you see a fat man with about fifty-seven chins come out of that door there, grab him, for that'll be Abe. He's one of those fellows who advertise each step up they take in the world by growing another chin.

"I'm told that way back in the nineties he only had two. If you do grab Abe remember that he knows me as George Wilson."



"You said you were going to explain that George Wilson business to me, Gussie, old man."

"Well, it's this way ——"

At this juncture dear old Gussie broke off short, rose from his seat, and sprang with indescribable vim at an extraordinarily stout chappie who had suddenly appeared. There was the deuce of a rush for him, but Gussie had got away to a good start, and the rest of the singers, dancers, jugglers, acrobats and refined-sketch teams seemed to recognize that he had won the trick, for they ebbed back into their places again, and Gussie and I went into the inner room.

Mr. Riesbitter lit a cigar and looked at us solemnly over his zareba of chins.

"Now let me tell ya something," he said to Gussie. "You lizzun t' me."

Gussie registered respectful attention. Mr. Riesbitter mused for a moment and shelled the cuspidor with indirect fire over the edge of the desk.

"Lizzun t' me," he said again. "I seen you rehearse, as I promised Miss Denison I would. You ain't bad for an amateur. You gotta lot to learn, but it's in you. What it comes to is that I can fix you up in the four-a-day, if you'll take

thirty-five per. I can't do better than that, and I wouldn't have done that if the little lady hadn't of kep' after me. Take it or leave it. What do you say?"

"I'll take it," said Gussie huskily. "Thank you."

In the passage outside Gussie gurgled with joy and slapped me on the back. "Bertie, old man, it's all right. I'm the happiest man in New York."

"Now what?"

"Well, you see, as I was just telling you when Abe came in, Ray's father used to be in the profession. He was before our time, but I remember hearing about him—Joe Danby. He used to be well known in London before he came over to America. Well, he's a fine old boy, but as obstinate as a mule, and he didn't like the idea of Ray marrying me, because I wasn't in the profession. Wouldn't hear of it. Well, you remember at Oxford I could always sing a song pretty well; so Ray got hold of old Riesbitter and made him promise to come and hear me rehearse and get me bookings if he liked my work. She stands high with him. She coached me for weeks, the darling. And now, as you heard him say, he's booked me in the small time at thirty-five dollars a week."

I steadied myself against the wall. The effect of the restoratives supplied by my pal at the hotel bar were beginning to work off, and I felt a little weak. Through a sort of mist I seemed to have a vision of Aunt Agatha hearing that the head of the Mannering-Phippses was about to appear on the vaudeville stage. Aunt Agatha's worship of the family name amounts to an obsession. The Mannering-Phippses were an old-established clan when William the Conqueror was a small boy going round with bare legs and a catapult. For centuries they have called kings by their first names and helped dukes with their weekly rent; and there's practically nothing a Mannering-Phipps can do that doesn't blot his escutcheon. So what Aunt Agatha would say—beyond saying that it was all my fault—when she learned the horrid news, it was beyond me to imagine.

"Come back to the hotel, Gussie," I said. "There's a sportsman there who mixes things he calls lightning whizzers. Something tells me I need one now. And excuse me for one minute, Gussie. I want to send a cable."

It was clear to me by now that Aunt Agatha had picked the wrong man for this job of disentangling Gussie from the clutches of the American vaudeville profession. What I needed was reënforcements. For a moment I

thought of cabling Aunt Agatha to come over, but reason told me that this would be overdoing it. I wanted assistance but not so badly as that. I hit what seemed to me the happy mean. I cabled to Gussie's mother and made it urgent.

"What were you cabling about?" asked Gussie later.

"Oh, just to say I had arrived safely, and all that sort of tosh," I answered.

Gussie opened his vaudeville career on the following Monday at a rummy sort of place uptown where they had moving pictures some of the time and, in between, one or two vaudeville acts. It had taken a lot of careful handling to bring him up to the scratch. He seemed to take my sympathy and assistance for granted, and I couldn't let him down. My only hope, which grew as I listened to him rehearsing, was that he would be such a frightful frost at his first appearance that he would never dare perform again; and, as that would automatically squash the marriage, it seemed best to me to let the thing go on.

He wasn't taking any chances. On the Saturday and Sunday we practically lived in a beastly little music room at the offices of the publishers whose songs he proposed to use. A

little chappie with a hooked nose sucked a cigarette and played the piano all day. Nothing could tire that lad. He seemed to take a personal interest in the thing. Gussie would clear his throat and begin:

"There's a great big choo-choo waiting at the deepo."

The Chappie—playing chords: "Is that so? What's it waiting for?"

Gussie—rather rattled at the interruption: "Waiting for me."

The Chappie—surprised: "For you?"

Gussie—sticking to it: "Waiting for me-e-ee!"

The Chappie—skeptically: "You don't say!"

Gussie: "For I'm off to Tennessee."

The Chappie—conceding a point: "Now, I live at Yonkers."

He did this all through the song. At first poor old Gussie asked him to stop, but the chappie said, No, it was always done. It helped to get pep into the thing. He appealed to me whether the thing didn't want a bit of pep, and I said it wanted all the pep it could get. And

the chappie said to Gussie: “There you are!” So Gussie had to stand it.

The other song that he intended to sing was one of those moon songs. He told me in a hushed voice that he was using it because it was one of the songs that the girl Ray sang when lifting them out of their seats at Mosenstein’s and elsewhere. The fact seemed to give it sacred associations for him.

You will scarcely believe me, but the management expected Gussie to show up and start performing at one o’clock in the afternoon. I told him they couldn’t be serious, as they must know that he would be rolling out for a bit of lunch at that hour, but Gussie said this was the usual thing in the four-a-day, and he didn’t suppose he would ever get any lunch again till he landed on the big time. I was just condoling with him when I found that he was taking it for granted that I should be there at one o’clock too. My idea had been that I should look in at night, when—if he survived—he would be coming up for the fourth time; but I’ve never deserted a pal in distress, so I said good-by to the little lunch I’d been planning at a rather decent tavern I’d discovered on Fifth Avenue, and trailed along.

They were showing pictures when I reached my seat. It was one of those Western films, where the cowboy jumps on his horse

and rides across country at a hundred and fifty miles an hour to escape the sheriff, not knowing, poor chump! that he might just as well stay where he is, the sheriff having a horse of his own which can do three hundred miles an hour without coughing. I was just going to close my eyes and try to forget till they put Gussie's name up, when I discovered that I was sitting next to a deucedly pretty girl.

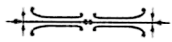
No, let me be honest. When I went in I had seen that there was a deucedly pretty girl sitting in that particular seat, so I had taken the next one. What happened now was that I began, as it were, to drink her in. I wished they would turn the lights up so that I could see her better. She was rather small, with great big eyes and a ripping smile. It was a shame to let all that run to seed, so to speak, in semidarkness.

Suddenly the lights did go up, and the orchestra began to play a tune which, though I haven't much of an ear for music, seemed somehow familiar. The next instant out pranced old Gussie from the wings in a purple frock coat and a brown top hat, grinned feebly at the audience, tripped over his feet, blushed, and began to sing the Tennessee song.

It was rotten. The poor nut had got stage fright so badly that it practically eliminated

his voice. He sounded like some far-off echo of the past yodeling through a woolen blanket.

He Sounded Like Some Far-Off Echo of the Past Yodeling Through a Woolen Blanket



For the first time since I had heard that he was about to go into vaudeville I felt a faint hope creeping over me. I was sorry for the wretched chap, of course, but there was no denying that the thing had its bright side. No management on earth would go on paying thirty-five dollars a week for this sort of performance. This was going to be Gussie's first and only. He would have to leave the profession. The old boy would say, "Unhand my daughter." And, with decent luck, I saw myself leading Gussie on to the next England-bound liner and handing him over intact to Aunt Agatha.

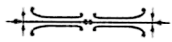
He got through the song somehow and limped off amidst roars of silence from the audience. There was a brief respite, then out he came again.

He sang this time as if nobody loved him. As a song, it was not a very pathetic song, being all about coons spooning in June under the moon, and so on and so forth, but Gussie handled it in such a sad, crushed way that there was genuine anguish in every line. By the time he reached the refrain I was nearly in tears. It seemed such a rotten sort of world with all that sort of thing going on in it.

He started the refrain, and then the most frightful thing happened. The girl next me got up in her seat, chucked her head back, and

The Most Frightful Thing Happened. The Girl Next Me Got Up and Began to Sing

began to sing too. I say "too," but it wasn't really too, because her first note stopped Gussie dead, as if he had been pole-axed.

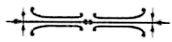


I never felt so bally conspicuous in my life. I huddled down in my seat and wished I could turn my collar up. Everybody seemed to be looking at me.

In the midst of my agony I caught sight of Gussie. A complete change had taken place in the old lad. He was looking most frightfully bucked. I must say the girl was singing most awfully well, and it seemed to act on Gussie like a tonic. When she came to the end of the refrain he took it up, and they sang it together, and the end of it was that he went off the popular hero. The audience yelled for more and were only quieted when they turned down the lights and put on a film.

When I had recovered I tottered round to see Gussie. I found him sitting on a box behind the stage, looking like one who had seen visions.

"Isn't she a wonder, Bertie!" he said devoutly. "I hadn't a notion she was going to be there. She's playing the Auditorium this week, and she can only just have had time to get back to her matinée. She risked being late, just to come and see me through. She's my good angel, Bertie. She saved me. If she hadn't helped me out I don't know what would have happened. I was so nervous I didn't know what I was doing. Now that I've got through the first show I shall be all right."



I was glad I had sent that cable to his mother. I was going to need her. The thing had got beyond me.

During the next week I saw a lot of old Gussie and was introduced to the girl. I also met her father, a formidable old boy with thick eyebrows and a sort of determined expression. On the following Wednesday Aunt Julia arrived.

Mrs. Mannering-Phipps, my Aunt Julia, is, I think, the most dignified person I know. She lacks Aunt Agatha's punch, but in a quiet way she has always contrived to make me feel, from boyhood up, that I was a poor worm. Not that she harries me like Aunt Agatha. The difference between the two is that Aunt Agatha conveys the impression that she considers me personally responsible for all the sin and sorrow in the world, while Aunt Julia's manner seems to suggest that I am more to be pitied than censured.

If it wasn't that the thing was a matter of historical fact, I should decline to believe that Aunt Julia had ever been on the vaudeville stage. She is like a stage duchess. She always seems to me to be in a perpetual state of being about to desire the butler to instruct the head footman to serve lunch in the blue room overlooking the west terrace. She exudes dignity. Yet, twenty-five years ago, so I've been

told by old boys who were lads about town in those days, she was knocking them cold at the Tivoli in a double act called Fun in a Tea Shop, in which she wore tights and sang a song with a chorus that began "Rumty-tiddley-umpty-ay."

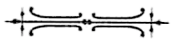
There are some things a chappie's mind absolutely refuses to picture, and Aunt Julia singing "Rumty-tiddley-umpty-ay" is one of them.

She got straight to the point within five minutes of our meeting:

"What is this about Gussie? Why did you cable for me, Bertie?"

"It's rather a long story," I said, "and complicated. If you don't mind, I'll let you have it in a series of motion pictures. Suppose we look in at the Auditorium for a few minutes."

The girl, Ray, had been reëngaged for a second week at the Auditorium, owing to the big success of her first week. Her act consisted of three songs. She did herself well in the matter of costume and scenery. She had a ripping voice. She looked most awfully pretty; and altogether the act was, broadly speaking, a pippin.



Aunt Julia didn't speak till we were in our seats. Then she gave a sort of sigh.

"It's twenty-five years since I was in a music hall!"

She didn't say any more, but sat there with her eyes glued on the stage.

After about half an hour the Johnnies who work the card-index system at the side of the stage put up the name Ray Denison, and there was a good deal of applause.

"Watch this act, Aunt Julia," I said.

She didn't seem to hear me.

"Twenty-five years! What did you say, Bertie?"

"Watch this act and tell me what you think of it."

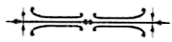
"Who is it? Ray—oh!"

"Exhibit A," I said. "The girl Gussie's engaged to."

The girl did her act, and the house rose at her. They didn't want to let her go. She had to come back again and again. When she had finally disappeared I turned to Aunt Julia.

"Well?" I said.

"I like her work. She's an artist."



"We will now, if you don't mind, step a goodish way uptown."

And we took the Subway to where Gussie, the human film, was earning his thirty-five per. As luck would have it, we hadn't been in the place ten minutes when out he came.

"Exhibit B," I said. "Gussie."

I don't quite know what I had expected her to do, but I certainly didn't expect her to sit there without a word. She did not move a muscle, but just stared at Gussie as he drooled on about the moon. I was sorry for the woman, for it must have been a shock to her to see her only son in a mauve frock coat and a brown top hat, but I thought it best to let her get a strangle hold on the intricacies of the situation as quickly as possible. If I had tried to explain the affair without the aid of illustrations I should have talked all day and left her muddled up as to who was going to marry whom, and why.

I was astonished at the improvement in dear old Gussie. He had got back his voice and was putting the stuff over well. It reminded me of the night at Oxford when, then but a lad of eighteen, he sang Let's All Go Down the Strand, after a bump supper, standing the while up to his knees in the college fountain.

He was putting just the same zip into the thing now.

When he had gone off Aunt Julia sat perfectly still for a long time, and then she turned to me. Her eyes shone queerly.

"What does this mean, Bertie?"

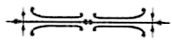
She spoke quite quietly, but her voice shook a bit.

"Gussie went into the business," I said, "because the girl's father wouldn't let him marry her unless he did. If you feel up to it perhaps you wouldn't mind tottering round to One Hundred and Thirty-Third Street and having a chat with him. He's an old boy with eyebrows, and he's Exhibit C on my list. When I've put you in touch with him I rather fancy my share of the business is concluded, and it's up to you."

The Danbys lived in one of those big apartments uptown which look as if they cost the earth and really cost about half as much as a hall room down in the forties. We were shown into the sitting room, and presently old Danby came in.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Danby," I began.

I had got as far as that when there was a kind of gasping cry at my elbow.



"Joe!" cried Aunt Julia and staggered against the sofa.

For a moment old Danby stared at her, and then his mouth fell open and his eyebrows shot up like rockets.

"Julie!"

And then they had got hold of each other's hands and were shaking them till I wondered their arms didn't come unscrewed.

I'm not equal to this sort of thing at such short notice. The change in Aunt Julia made me feel quite dizzy. She had shed her *grande-dame* manner completely, and was blushing and smiling—I don't like to say such things of any aunt of mine, or I would go farther and put it on record that she was giggling. And old Danby, who usually looked like a cross between a Roman emperor and Napoleon Bonaparte in a bad temper, was behaving like a small boy.

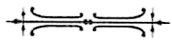
"Joe!"

"Julie!"

"Dear old Joe, fancy meeting you again!"

"Wherever have you come from, Julie?"

Well, I didn't know what it was all about, but I felt a bit out of it. I butted in:



"Aunt Julia wants to have a talk with you, Mr. Danby."

"I knew you in a second, Joe."

"It's twenty-five years since I saw you, kid, and you don't look a day older."

"Oh, Joe! I'm an old woman!"

"What are you doing over here? I suppose"—old Danby's cheerfulness waned a trifle—"I suppose your husband is with you?"

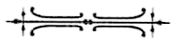
"My husband died a long, long while ago, Joe."

Old Danby shook his head.

"You never ought to have married out of the profession, Julie. I'm not saying a word against the late—I can't remember his name, never could—but you shouldn't have done it, an artist like you. Shall I ever forget the way you used to knock them with Rumty-tiddley-umpty-ay!"

"Ah! How wonderful you were in that act, Joe!" Aunt Julia sighed. "Do you remember the backfall you used to do down the steps? I always have said that you did the best backfall in the profession."

"I couldn't do it now!"



"Do you remember how we put it across at the Canterbury, Joe? Think of it! The Canterbury's a moving-picture house now, and the old Mogul runs French *revues*."

"I'm glad I'm not there to see them."

"Joe, tell me. Why did you leave England?"

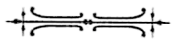
"Well, I—I wanted a change. No, I'll tell you the truth, kid. I wanted you, Julie. You went off and married that—whatever that stage-door Johnny's name was—and it broke me all up."

Aunt Julia was staring at him. She is what they call a well-preserved woman. It's easy to see that, twenty years ago, she must have been something quite extraordinary to look at. Even now she's almost beautiful. She has very large brown eyes, a mass of soft gray hair, and the complexion of a girl of seventeen.

"Joe! You aren't going to tell me you were fond of me yourself!"

"Of course I was fond of you! Why did I let you have all the fat in Fun in a Tea Shop? Why did I hang about upstage while you sang Rumty-tiddley-umpty-ay? Do you remember my giving you a bag of buns when we were on the road at Bristol?"

"Yes, but ——"



"Do you remember my giving you the ham sandwiches at Portsmouth?"

"Joe!"

"Do you remember my giving you a seedcake at Birmingham? What did you think all that meant, if not that I loved you? Why, I was working up by degrees to telling you straight out, when you suddenly went off and married that cane-sucking dude. That's why I wouldn't let my daughter marry this young chap, Wilson, unless he went into the profession. She's an artist ——"

"She certainly is, Joe."

"You've seen her? Where?"

"At the Auditorium just now. But, Joe, you mustn't stand in the way of her marrying the man she's in love with. He's an artist too."

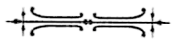
"In the small time."

"You were in the small time once, Joe. You mustn't look down on him because he's a beginner. I know you feel that your daughter is marrying beneath her, but ——"

"How on earth do you know anything about young Wilson?"

"He's my son."

"Your son!"



"Yes, Joe. And I've just been watching him work. Oh, Joe, you can't think how proud I was of him! He's got it in him. He can put it across. It's fate. He's my son and he's in the profession! Joe, you don't know what I've been through for his sake. They made a lady of me. I never worked so hard in my life as I did to become a real lady. They kept telling me I had got to put it across, no matter what it cost, so that he wouldn't be ashamed of me. The study was something terrible. I had to watch myself every minute for years, and I never knew when I might fluff in my lines or fall down on some bit of business. But I did it, because I didn't want him to be ashamed of me, though all the time I was just aching to be back where I belonged."

Old Danby made a jump at her, and took her by the shoulders.

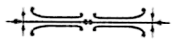
"Come back where you belong, Julie!" he cried. "Your husband's dead, your son's a pro. Come back! It's twenty-five years ago, but I haven't changed. I want you still. I've always wanted you. You've got to come back, kid, where you belong."

Aunt Julia gave a sort of gulp and looked at him.

"Joe!" she said in a kind of whisper.

“You’re here, kid,” said old Danby huskily. “You’ve come back. . . . Twenty-five years! . . .

They Got Hold of Each Others Hands and were Shaking Them Till I Wondered Their Arms Didn't Come Unscrewed!



You've come back and you're going to stay!"

She pitched forward into his arms, and he caught her.

"Oh, Joe! Joe! Joe!" she said. "Hold me. Don't let me go. Take care of me."

And I edged for the door and slipped from the room. I felt weak. The old bean will stand a certain amount, but this was too much. I groped my way out into the street and wailed for a taxi.

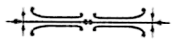
Gussie called on me at the hotel that night. He curvetted into the room as if he had bought it and the rest of the city.

"Bertie," he said, "I feel as if I were dreaming."

"I wish I could feel like that, old top," I said, and I took another glance at a cable that had arrived half an hour ago from Aunt Agatha. I had been looking at it at intervals ever since.

"Ray and I got back to her flat this evening. Who do you think was there? The mater! She was sitting hand in hand with old Danby."

"Yes?"



"He was sitting hand in hand with her."

"Really?"

"They are going to be married."

"Exactly."

"Ray and I are going to be married."

"I suppose so."

"Bertie, old man, I feel immense. I look round me, and everything seems to me absolutely corking. The change in the mater is marvelous. She is twenty years younger. She and old Danby are talking of reviving Fun in a Tea Shop and going out on the road with it."

I got up.

"Gussie, old top," I said, "leave me for a while. I would be alone. I think I've got brain fever or something."

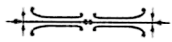
"Sorry, old man; perhaps New York doesn't agree with you. When do you expect to go back to England?"

I looked again at Aunt Agatha's cable.

"With luck," I said, "in about ten years."

When he was gone I took up the cable and read it again.

"What is happening," it read; "shall I come over?"



I sucked a pencil for a while, and then I wrote the reply.

It was not an easy cable to word, but I managed it.

“No,” I wrote, “stay where you are. Profession overcrowded.”

The End

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